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# SHORT STORY COMPETITION

*Teens and Adults*



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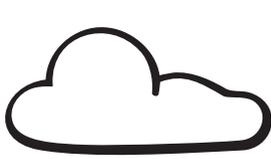
Ngā Puna Mātauranga o  
**Te Awa Kairangi ki Uta**  
Upper Hutt Libraries

### 3 **Teens Shortlist & Winners** (aged 13 -17)

- 4  ***Battle on Boulder Hill*** by Sarah Du Toit
- 6  ***Give you my Everything*** by Lucinda Kitching
- 10  ***The Piano*** by Aryanna Billington
- 15 ***Battlestar Nexus*** by Carlos Lyon
- 18 ***Murdered... Twice*** by Sarah Du Toit
- 22 ***The Magpies Awakening*** by Jessica Wiggins
- 25 ***Unlucky Number*** by Hannah Edwards
- 27 ***Transient Dreams*** by Rhea Wilson
- 28 ***Just a Memory*** by Olivia Trevean
- 31 ***The Government Secret: Lake Woodcamp*** by Kyra Baker

### 33 **Adults Shortlist & Winners** (aged 18+)

- 34  ***The Funeral*** by Alex Heke
- 38  ***Under the Moon*** by Moira Hansen
- 42  ***The Magic Dream Bag*** by Arja Hone
- 46 ***Lost Time*** by Elaine Casey
- 50 ***The Cat Come Home*** by Ian Jones
- 54 ***The Crossroads*** by Mathew Canlas
- 57 ***A Cup of Coffee Later*** by Jamie Webb
- 61 ***Her First Interview*** by Laura Malin-Curry
- 63 ***Streetlight Starlight*** by Leo Hollbrook
- 65 ***Small Town Hero*** by Terry Kavanagh



**Teens**



*Shortlist  
& Winners*

## Battle on Boulder Hill

by Sarah du Toit

The battle has hit its climax. Everyone is on the field; if they're not fighting they're dead. Bodies decorate the ground at soldiers' feet, trying their best not to step on them while blocking their opponents' blows. A thick mist has fallen over the hill, making it hard to see more than ten feet in front of you. Rough rocks point out from the ground, disturbing the green field of grass. The sound of swords clashing together and voices screaming out – in passion and agony – drills into my ears. Blood and sweat fills my nose and mouth. The mist has dampened everything, hair sticks to foreheads, and clothing clings to bodies.

All my and Evett's attempts to create harmony between our kings have failed. Our love could not keep the peace. Could not break the decade long blood feud between our families. I Tighten my hold on my sword's handle, and the feel of metal against my skin compels me to focus on the fighting at hand.

A big brute rushes towards me, his sword aims for my heart. The charge makes him unsteady on his feet and I easily sidestep the attempt, making a slash at his arm. He dodges my move, rebalancing within a split second, and swings at my throat. The metallic clash of our swords sting through my ears. Our weapons connect in a stalemate between our faces. Reaching for his wrist I twist until a crack can be heard, and his sword drops. I deliver the final blow as he falls to the ground.

In the corner of my eye our king, my father, disarms yet another enemy soldier. In his haste to get away, the man trips over a rock and falls backwards. Holding up his hands he begs to be spared. My father lowers his sword, only to raise it against another attacker.

Warm pain pulses through my upper arm, and a man to my left grins at the small victory. It's the last one he'll have. It only takes me a matter of seconds to disarm and finish him off. Whirling back to check on my father I see the man he had just spared approaching him. He picks up a small knife from a fallen soldier's hand, and gently walks up behind my father. Our king is too occupied with fighting off the other attacker to notice, and I yell out a warning, but my voice gets lost in the mist and noise. The knife in the man's hand swiftly cuts through the skin at my father's throat, blood oozing out. I can see the surprise in his eyes from here. He falls to his knees with his hands around his throat, before landing face down on the ground, completely lifeless.

I scream as the anger ripples through me at this betrayal, and from a man whose life he'd just spared. He shall be spared no more. I lift my sword and strike down the man my father had just been fighting. His weapon falls out of

his hands and the other man makes a rush towards it; knowing that his small knife will be of no use against me. I reach him first, and swiftly cut off the hand that had murdered my king. The man's scream seems to shake the earth, but my fury blocks it out. One more slash across his throat and he falls down.

Wiping the blood from my sword, I scan the battlefield for my next target. Another of our soldiers fall to the ground on my right. Charging over to continue the fight with his opponent I make a quick swing at the man's head. He blocks it and I spin around quickly to swing again, this time aiming for his side. He blocks it again, following it with an advance of his own. It barely misses my arm, and I catch his sword with my own. Pushing with all my might to create some distance between us.

Both of us are breathing hard, and I only get a glimpse of his face now. I feel my heart in my throat. It's Evett. His eyes soften with relief at me recognizing him amongst the fighting. Lowering his sword he pushes the dark hair out of his face, sweat causing the curls to cling to his forehead. We had planned to marry – not to unite our kingdoms, but for love. Our fathers wouldn't hear of it. Father. My mind flashes back to his lifeless body.

I make a quick lunge at Evett, catching him by complete surprise. He makes a weak attempt at blocking, but the impact is enough to knock him off his feet. He pushes himself backwards as I approach him, my sword following his throat. He freezes as his back hits a rock. His mouth moves but no sound comes out as I press the point of my blade into his skin. Just enough to puncture it and cause a thin line of crimson to trickle down his throat. His eyes don't leave mine, pleading, willing, me to stop. But this is a battle, and showing mercy is a fast way to earn a slit throat. My father had to learn that the hard way and I won't make the same mistake.

## Give you my Everything

by Lucinda Kitching

The cold, cruel wind whips through the tall fir trees, my cold feet crunching on the icy snow covering the forest floor. The final, golden rays of sun shine upon my face, decorating my brown eyes with an elegant sparkle. I turn my face away from the sun, focusing on the tall structure in the distance.

This is the meeting place, isn't it?

I soon approach the building, which seems to be one of the many Ancient Ruins that dot the continent like sprinkles.

"Adena!" I call out, "Are you there?" But only silence replies to me.

I decide to enter the ruin, knowing that shelter in this weather is more important than any danger that might lie inside. As I pass through what must have been a courtyard in the past, I spot a black shadow in the distance. I squint my eyes toward it, trying to make out the shape, but the fading light makes it hard to see.

"Adena!?" I yell out again, "Anyone?!"

I listen out for any human noise, but a different sound returns to me. The unsheathing of something metal. A dagger.

I reach instinctively for the dagger at my belt, but realise I no longer have it with me. I must have lost it in the commotion earlier.

Pushing down the urge to curse my clumsiness, I carefully pick up a sharp-looking stick from the ground. Better than nothing.

I tread carefully towards the sound. My training is finally coming in handy after all these years. When Mother died, I decided I should commit my life to fighting the Republic, and that's what I'm doing.

The light is now almost completely gone, and I struggle to see 10 feet ahead of me, but I continue. On the off-chance that this person is Adena, it'll be worth it, won't it?

Suddenly, a gunshot rings out, echoing through the ruin and missing me by inches. The accuracy of the shot in the dark scares me.

"Surrender!" a voice shouts from the same direction of the shot, "We are armed!" We? There's more than one?

I don't reply, instead quietly tiptoeing around a tall stone wall, away from the people. I head for a dark, shadow-strewn corner, and let the darkness swallow me, blending in with my black clothes and hair.

BANG! Another gunshot reverberates around me, and I hear fast-paced footsteps coming closer to me.

I take in a shuddering breath. There's no way I came so far just to be captured again. My heart screams in my chest, pounding against my chest like a trapped prisoner.

What can I do? How can I fight off these soldiers from the Republic?

As I watch the shadows grow, creeping out to regain their land, I remember.

I remember Adena and I escaping, I remember us being separated, I remember her telling me to only surrender if my life was in danger. Adena is my only friend left. She is everything to me.

My life is in danger now. I can die or spend my life in the grasp of the Republic who took my homeland, my family and my friends away from me.

But if I die now, Mother would have died in vain. Tears pool in my eyes as I reminisce that final moment with her.

“Go! You have to escape! Please, my Aevara. Even though this world can take things away from us, they can never erase what is in your heart.”

I shake my tears away and step out of the darkness. I hope I don't regret this.

“I surrender.” My voice is wobbly, and uncertain, but I know I have to. I put my hands up in the chill winter air.

The people in front of me, who I recognise as Republic soldiers, have their guns out, and I see daggers at their belts. Their faces are masked, the only visible body parts being their eyes and hair.

“Drop your weapons.”

The whole world goes silent as I drop the stick. It lands with a clatter on the frozen ground.

“That's everything?” asks the same soldier, “How ever did you manage to escape with no weapons?”

I roll my eyes but stay silent. It's better not to provoke the people who have your life in their hands.

One of them; tall, with dark brown hair and grey eyes, looks straight into my eyes and asks, “What's your name?”

I avert my eyes as I answer, “Aevara Kanami.”

I hear a sudden gasp of surprise from inside the crowd of soldiers, and I look up, confused.

How could one of them know me, or my name?

I glance up quickly and see that one has left the tight-knit group and stepped forward. They are quite tall, with light brown hair tied up into a high ponytail, and glimmering blue eyes, but as they remove their mask, I gasp in horror.

No, it can't be.

But there's no mistaking it. The sharp, refined features of her beautiful face comes back to me, and it matches perfectly with this face, in front of me right now.

Adena.

My first reaction is shock, and I freeze. "Adena?" I breathe, staring straight into her eyes. She looks right back, her eyes piercing me, sending a needle through my heart.

My best friend of all these years can't have joined the Republic, could she? "Hello Vara." Her use of my nickname in my vulnerability angers me.

"How could you?" I whisper, my voice ice cold, "I thought you were my friend. Or maybe- even more than a friend."

Adena looks at me, and I can see tears streaming down her face. "I had no choice, Vara. I had no choice. But we can still be together! You can join the Republic!"

"What?!" I gasp, "How could I- I need some time to-"

Another soldier steps forward. "As touching as this moment is," he laughs, looking at Adena and I, "We need you to decide now. You can join our army, and be a soldier in the glorious Republic, or be a prisoner of war."

"I can't decide now!" I cry.

Adena is the only person I have left. My family is dead. My friends have been captured. The only person I have is Adena, who has now joined the Republic. Chances are that if I don't join them now, I'll never see her again.

I take a deep breath, trying to process it all.

Two soldiers come up to me and tie my hands around my back. "We will give you 24 hours to decide. If you do not decide by then, well-" The soldier doesn't say anything else, but I can tell what he's indicating.

I nod, and Adena comes up to me.

“Please join us.” she begs, “Please. I don’t care about this war anymore. I just want to be with my last friend.”

And I know that’s what I want too.

As I sit on the cold, damp, stone of the dungeon I have been locked in, chains wrapped around my arms and legs, I contemplate joining the Republic. It would mean I wouldn’t have to run anymore. I wouldn’t have to be scared of being captured for every waking hour of my life.

I would be with Adena.

But how could I side with the Republic that killed my family in this brutal war of powers? The door swings open with a creak, and Adena enters, followed by two others.

“Adena!” I exclaim, “I’ll join the Republic!”

Adena laughs, her face morphing into one of delight. Something about her smile confuses me. I frown. “Adena?”

“There’s something I have to tell you, Aevara Kanami.” she says, but her voice has changed. This isn’t the voice of Adena anymore. Something’s wrong.

I stand, and try to back away, but I realise I’m in a dungeon.

“I am not Adena.” She shakes her head, her brown hair covering her face for only a second, but when she turns back to me, her face is different.

I yell out in shock. “No!” I gasp, “No! How are you-” But as I study her face, I realise I’ve been tricked. The woman who is not Adena smiles.

“Welcome to the Republic.”

## The Piano

by Aryanna Billington

*'The songs of yesterday are the treasured memories of tomorrow.'*

Laughter rang through the air as a young couple spent time in a sun-dappled courtyard. There was a flash of daffodil yellow as the lady twirled, her summer dress swirling around her. Her husband lounged on the grassy bank; the corners of his grey eyes crinkled as he grinned at her. His sky-blue polo shirt tightened as he reached over for the camera. Crossing his legs, he began to film. She tipped her head back and soaked up the sunshine, her auburn hair transforming into a wildfire as she spun. Standing up, the man brushed dirt of his pressed grey suit pants and strolled over to her, took her hand and danced with her. After some time, they stopped, breathless and giggling. Holding hands, they explored deeper, eventually coming upon the manor.

It had the air of memories long forgotten. The musky smell of dusty nostalgia intertwined with mildew wafted around it, mingling with the ghosts of the past. An eerie tune of a lone piano echoed throughout the building, just out of reach. Familiar, and yet unknown. Trapped on the tip of your tongue.

They shared a giddy smile as they inserted the key together. Sunlight poured through the doors, splashing onto everything in its reach.

Silence echoed through the empty manor.

Shadows danced in the corners, and cobwebs caught memories, holding them out of reach.

Tip-toeing around, the newly-weds gradually explored the place, eventually pausing for a picnic on the dusty floor. Upon resuming, the lady called out in delighted surprise - excited to show what she had discovered.

### **A piano.**

Brushing away the dust, they sat down and played. The intertwining melodies sang of hope and new beginnings. The air was filled with the sweet sounds of the duet, vibrant like an orange. Rich like caramel. The sun filtered through the grimy windows, flickering around them. It wove a tale of everlasting love and friendship. That no matter what, they would be there for each other. Always.

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The piano was left for a while, as life continued. Moving in. Cleaning up the inherited manor. Beginning work. The piano sat there. Alone, but only for a moment.

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One day, little hands reached up and opened the piano lid. Hauling himself up onto the seat, the little boy began to play.

At first, it was but the chaos of excited youth. A stampede of clashing notes shouted through the house. Over time, melodies formed from the chaos as the loving hands of parents patiently guided him. The torrent of noise morphed into raw music. Riddled with mistakes, it reflected the bare essence of youth. Bright and energetic, but short. Gone before you realise it. Unlike the duet before, this song was impatient, calling for attention. For the spotlight. But then it was gone.

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The little fingers came back, though they had grown. As the boy sat down at the piano, he carried the worries of the world on his shoulders. Burdened by the expectations of society, he began to play. This song wove the tale of the teenage years, woeful for the innocence lost. Tears mingled with the music, their salt bringing out the bitter flavours to life. Darkness engulfed the room, demons lurking in the shadows. A shaft of moonlight pierced the night, beaming through a window and pooled around the boy and the piano. The spotlight was on him, though unlike how he had dreamed before. His music had changed far from the crazed energy of youth, morphing into a mournful, melancholic melody the colour of murky waters reflected in the minor notes. Murky uncertainty. Tainted by the pressures of society. Dissonance cut through the music, weaving subtle lines of darkness and insecurity.

The song ended unresolved, left hanging.

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Once again, the piano was left alone. Life carried on, flying about around it. And still it sat there, waiting.

Waiting.

Waiting.

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Sand trickled through the hourglass as time ticked by. The piano sat, once again left to collect dust. The ghosts of music echoed around it - imaginary fingers tinkled the ivory keys.

Forgotten, but only for a moment.

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Then, s l o w l y, an elderly lady hobbled over to the piano - her daffodil yellow dress hung limply around her, nothing but a drooping flower. She carefully lowered herself onto the seat, then placed her fingers on the old keys. Closing her eyes, she reminisced times long forgotten. The bitter-sweet fragrance of memories slipping away lingered, tainting the air. Alone, she began to play. To play a song remembered when everything else was forgotten. The eerie melody echoed throughout the empty home.

As the faces in the pictures became foreign and she couldn't remember who used to sit next to her at the piano, whom she had shared her heart with, as the world kept spinning and was shrouded in darkness and uncertainty, as, like the flower, she too began to droop, and as her time came to an end, she played.

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g that.

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And so the piano sat alone, covered in a blanket of white. Uncertainty dancing around it on tiptoes. Time ticked on by, trickling through the hourglass.

Waiting.

Waiting.

Waiting.

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A veil of nostalgia encompassed it, ghosts dancing in the wind.

Waiting.

Waiting.

Waiting.

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For the next person to come and play their story.

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The patter of little footsteps echo through the empty manor as a little girl skips through. A flash of daffodil yellow as she twirls, her pretty dress swirling around her. Hand-in-hand, her father guides her towards something in the parlour. The

familiar ivory keys smiled up at him as he opened the lid. The force of memories hit him, lined with the silver-lilac tint of bitter-sweet. His parents sitting on either side of him, showing him how to cultivate his youthful chaos into meaningful melodies. Then how he sought release in those melodies in the dead of night, the minor notes reflecting the dissonance inside him.

The ghost of a smile crossed his lips, his gaze wandering in recollection. Warm tendrils of spring air crept from the windows, slipping around them. The little tug on his sleeve reminds him of where he was. Smiling down at the little ray of sunshine, he pulls back the seat.

And so he sits next to the little girl dressed in sunflower yellow and teaches her how to play. Sharing a part of his soul. Their music is a song of youth and old, innocence and wisdom, hope and love. It hints of a time of pain, of grief, but how they have come to pass, paving way for joy and a future.

The manor once had the air of memories long forgotten. The musky smell of dusty nostalgia intertwined with mildew had wafted around it, mingling with the ghosts of the past. An eerie tune of a lone piano once echoed throughout the building, just out of reach. Familiar, and yet unknown. Trapped on the tip of your tongue.

But now it was a home, forged through the hard-work and love of his parents. Sunlight pours through the doors, splashing onto everything in its reach. As he sits and plays with his daughter, he can feel his parents love encompassing the room.

For it was never really forgotten, or abandoned. Merely waiting.

Waiting.

Waiting.

Waiting.

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For the colour of life to spill through, cleaning away the dust and abandonment. All because of one thing.

**A piano.**

*'The songs of yesterday are the treasured memories of tomorrow.'*

# Battlestar Nexus

by Carlos Lyon



In the distant reaches of the Andromeda Galaxy, where constellations whispered secrets and black holes spun cosmic yarns, humanity had forged a fragile alliance with the interstellar races. The United Galactic Coalition stood as the last bastion against the encroaching darkness.

Captain Aria Solstice, commander of the starship, *Odyssey*, had seen her share of celestial wonders and horrors. Her crew, a motley mix of humans, cyborgs, and telepathic beings, was bound by a singular purpose: to protect the Nexus gateway connecting galaxies.

The Nexus was no ordinary wormhole. It shimmered like a thousand opals, its energy humming with untold potential. Whoever controlled it could traverse the cosmos in an instant, bypassing light-years of space. And therein lay the danger. The Xyloths, insectoid conquerors from the Epsilon Quadrant, coveted the Nexus. Their hive minds hungered for dominion over all realms. Their warships, sleek and deadly, swarmed like cosmic locusts. Their queen, Zyraeth, was a living weapon, a fusion of organic and machine, her eyes pulsing with malevolence.

The first battle erupted near the Nexus. Starships clashed, lasers carving through the void. The Odyssey danced between enemy fire, its hull groaning under the



strain. Aria's heart raced as she barked orders to her crew. Lieutenant Kael, the android engineer, rerouted power to shields. Dr. Lyra, the empathic healer, tended to wounded telepaths. And Commander Rho, the enigmatic alien strategist, plotted their next move.

The Xyloth flagship, Voidreaper, loomed a skeletal monstrosity with tendrils that siphoned energy from dying stars. Its cannons fired, ripping through the Odyssey's shields. Aria clenched her fists. She had lost her family to the Xyloths, her homeworld reduced to cosmic dust.

"Captain," Rho's voice crackled over the comm. "We can't hold much longer."

Aria's resolve hardened. "Prepare the Nova Cannon."

The Nova Cannon, a forbidden weapon, could rupture the fabric of spacetime. But it required a sacrifice. A life to ignite its core.

As the Voidreaper closed in, Aria made her choice. She strapped into the cannon, her pulse synchronized with the Nexus's rhythm. The ship shuddered as the cannon charged. Aria's mind touched the void, glimpsing forgotten constellations and lost civilizations.

"Captain," Kael's voice trembled. "We can't"

"Fire!" Aria's scream echoed through the ship.

The Nexus flared. The Voidreaper disintegrated, its fragments scattering across the galaxy. Aria's body dissolved, merging with the cosmic tapestry. She became stardust, her essence woven into the Nexus. The battle ended. The Nexus pulsed, its energy rebalanced. The Xyloths retreated, their queen's rage echoing through the void.

And so, Captain Aria Solstice became a legendary spectral guardian of the Nexus. Her crew mourned her, but they knew: she had become the bridge between galaxies, a beacon of hope. As the stars whispered her name, the universe held its breath. For in the heart of the Nexus, Aria awaited her consciousness entwined with the very fabric of existence. And when darkness threatened, she would emerge a spectral starship, blazing across the cosmos, a harbinger of war and salvation. "Battlestar Nexus" a tale of sacrifice, courage, and the cosmic dance between life and eternity.

## **Murdered... twice**

by Sarah du Toit

Today is the day of my funeral, and of course I will be attending.

It's been four days since I died, and I've spent these last four days trying to figure out how exactly I came to be dead.

From what I've read online, a ghost forms due to not fulfilling their life's purpose yet. Invisible to all but their other half, or the cause of their death, they are cursed to find their purpose in ghost form. I've heard stories of people helping their dead soulmate find their purpose, or their murderer.

Unfortunately, I've never even been in love, let alone found my soulmate. So it seems I'll have to discover how I died on my own.

From newspaper clippings and conversations, I've managed to piece together some information. If I wasn't a ghost and didn't breathe anymore, I'm sure I would've hyperventilated when I came across that first missing person poster.

Still coming to terms with being a ghost, I'd been walking down the street, desperately waving at strangers hoping they'd stop playing this cruel joke and notice me.

But there, stapled to a post was a single sheet of paper.

The photo was one of me from earlier in the year. A smile on my face as I walked through a grass field. In bold, red text above was printed the words 'MISSING'. Below the picture was my family's contact details and, along with my description, my last known location.

***Last seen walking home in the Bronville area on Tuesday at 11:25 pm.***

***Dressed in black jeans and a black hoodie.***

***Please contact us or the police if you have any information.***

From what I remember, I'd been walking home from my friend Jessie's house, worried about the trouble I'd be in for being out past my curfew on a school night. I couldn't have been more than a block away from home.

Whether something happened to me, or if I just can't remember getting home, I'm not sure. There are a few points of my memory that's blotchy.

At my funeral, while all the sad speeches and sappy recalls of my life were made, I went for a walk around the church grounds. Not going back in until the ceremony was over, and the socializing had begun.

Now, I watch as my parents and sister make their way through the crowd, filing into our old minivan, tears on their faces and tissues held to their noses.

Strolling through the crowd, I see my old and newer friends come together, bonding over the memory of me. Coming to a stop in front of a table of food, I scan the faces around me.

I've always wondered who would be at my funeral.

"What's wrong Cole? you look like you've seen a ghost." A lady says, catching my attention.

Turning around I find myself face to face with the quiet boy from school. I used to have a crush on him, back when I was alive.

Dark hair, green eyes framed with glasses, and dressed in a black suit, he looks as good as ever.

A strange feeling runs through me when I realize he's staring right into my eyes.

Putting my hand up, I give him a small wave, already calling myself an idiot for waving at someone while I'm a ghost. It's when he raises his own hand and awkwardly returns the gesture that I take a step backwards, finding myself in the middle of the table.

My attention is taken away from him as my neighbor walks up. He reaches into my stomach, taking a brownie from a plate on the table.

Stepping through him I look back over to where Cole was standing, finding his retreating figure heading for the door, face pale.

Following suit, I go after him as he continues walking through the door, finally coming to a stop in front of him under a tree.

"You can see me?" I immediately ask.

He swallows, scanning me over again before nodding.

That must mean... Cole is my soulmate?

Under different circumstances, I'd be giggling and kicking my feet like a ten-year-old.

"Y-you're dead." He says, reaching out a hand, quickly retracting it when it goes through my shoulder like it goes through air.

"Do you know what happened to me?" I ask, although it's unlikely he knows more than my family, and the police.

Relaxing his shoulders, he looks slightly surprised, pushing a hand through his hair.

"You don't remember anything?"

"No. Other than walking home at night from a friend's house. Why?"

"Nothing. I just know I wouldn't want to be a ghost with my last memory being how I died." He says, giving me a small smile.

“I might disagree if I knew what happened. But not knowing is driving me just as crazy.” I huff.

Crossing my arms I go to lean against the tree next to him, nearly falling straight through it. Forgetting I now need to consciously make an effort to solidify myself to touch things. I’m still practicing that part of being a ghost.

“I’ve walked down the street I was last seen a dozen times, and still don’t have any clue what happened.” I continue, hoping he didn’t notice my stumble.

“Maybe you got hit by a car. You were wearing black clothes in the dark.” he says, playing with his fingers nervously, totally oblivious to my embarrassing fail.

Catching me looking at him fidget, he apologizes. “Sorry, it feels weird talking to you about... well, your death.”

Nodding understandably, I answer his previous statement. “But what happened to my body?”

“Wild animals?” He throws out, not sounding convinced himself.

We’re interrupted by his mother rushing outside. “There you are honey. I understand how tough this is for you,” she says, pulling him into a hug. “I know how obsessed you were with her.”

Blushing, I meet his eyes to find him scowling. Clearly, he didn’t want me knowing that specific piece of information. I think it’s cute though, who doesn’t want their crush to be obsessed with them.

“We just need to stop at the Nowell’s to give them the casserole I baked, then we can go home, alright? I’ll be right back.” She assures, walking back towards the entrance.

Waiting until she’s out of ear shot, he clears his throat, breaking the silence. “Well, I’ll see you around then I guess?”

“Since you’re going to my house, can I come with you? Saves walking there.” I ask.

“What, no teleporting abilities?” He jokes, only halfheartedly, as he leads me to his blue hatchback.

He reaches for the backdoor, but I step past him. “I think it would be best if I ride in the trunk.”

Concerned, he stops me before I reach it. “Why? There are two empty seats in the back, only my mum is coming with.”

“Exactly. I don’t want you getting distracted by a ghost in your backseat. What if your mum notices you staring at nothing, or even worse if you talk to me not remembering she can’t see me.” I say. “She’ll think you’ve lost it.”

Speaking of his mother, she reappears at the church doors, making her way down the pavement towards us. Cole steps between me and the back of his car.

Frowning, I step closer anyway. "I appreciate the concern, Cole. But I'm dead, remember, I'll be fine."

Reaching through him, I open the boot, lifting my leg to step inside. Cole's mother reaches us without our notice, letting out a horrifying scream, and I freeze.

But it's not me she's screaming at.

It's the blood-stained boot. And the black jeans, haphazardly thrown on top of a hoodie of the same colour, in the corner. White granules nearly cover the whole floor.

In the opposing corner, stacks of torn missing person posters, with my photo on them, sit scattered.

The sound of a body hitting the floor diverts both our attentions back to Cole's mother. She's fainted, and he quickly picks her up, placing her along the backseat.

"Even in death you're a menace." He spits, closing the boot again.

What the...

Before I can muster up any words, Cole pulls something out of his pocket, throwing it at me. The same white granules I saw in the boot land on me, and it's not until it starts stinging like hell that I realize what it is.

Salt.

This guy carries salt around in his pocket. Has he been expecting me to return as a ghost?

The pain keeps increasing as I struggle to get the grains off me. My head starts spinning and I can't put up a fight as he steps closer, catching me in his arms as I start to collapse. I didn't know ghosts could faint.

Well, I didn't know we're vulnerable to salt either, I hadn't thought of researching my weaknesses. I'm conscious enough to register Cole lifting me up.

"How are you..." I mumble, fighting to keep my mind alive.

Being able to see a ghost is one thing, but being able to touch one? He wasn't able to earlier when his hand went through my shoulder.

"Iron laced gloves. I knew it was only a matter of time until you appeared." He says coldly. Opening the boot once more, he places me inside. "Hopefully this time I'll be able to get rid of you properly."

He slams the door down, locking me inside as everything goes dark.

# The Magpies Awakening

by Jessica Wiggins

I notice sensors planted all around the room. I carefully manoeuvred through the middle of the room, where the moon light refracted off a beautiful gold bracelet. I see a glimpse of sparkly glass covering the bracelet. I slowly lift the case, and swiftly swap the bracelet with a fake. I put the real one in a bag and attached it to my belt. I slid the glass case back on top of the fake bracelet and stepped back. On my way back this time I try to alarm each and every sensor. All the alarms go off, and I wait at the stairs for the cops to arrive. General George and his crew make it to the room with the fake bracelet. He disarms the sensors and walks over to the glass case. He examines the case before taking it off. He picks up the bracelet and notices an inscription on the inside of the bracelet as well as a magpie feather. The inscription reads “Better Luck Next Time - M”

“Dham you, Magpie,” shouts the General.

He marches over to his crew and orders everyone to search the building.

“No need to do that, General. I’m right here, come and get me.”

I blew him a kiss and ran up the stairs towards the roof of the museum and stopped before the drop. I dangled the tips of my toes over the edge and turned my head to face the door. A group of cops barged through the door with their guns held high.

“Hold it right there, Magpie. We have finally trapped you, there’s no escape” The General shouts with a big grin.

“Hello General. Long time no see,” I say while winking at him.

“No time for games, Magpie. You either come willingly or by force,” said the General in a cold voice.

“I have to say it was nice seeing you again, General. But tonight is not your night, until we meet again.” I took a bow and leaned backwards off the building. The cops ran to the edge and watched as I plummet 1000 feet to my death, but I had something else up my sleeve. As I am falling, I reach for a small tool on my belt. I put it in the palm of my hand, and the small tool grew into a grappling hook. I push a button on the tool and aim for a crane in the nearby construction area.

M.A.R.I.A., (My Artificial Intelligence Assistant) is communicating with me through my earpiece saying that I am 200 feet from the ground as the grapple line shoots for the crane.

“150 feet... 100 feet... 50 feet” says Maria.

Just in time the grapple line hooks onto the crane and I swing through the air. Leaving the cops flabbergasted. I continue swinging for a while until I am out of

sight, then gracefully land on the road of Cherry Avenue. I walk a few blocks until I reach my house on Barns Street. I pulled down my hood, and mask. I reached for the door to unlock it, but it had already been opened. I grab my black dagger with a pearl handle from my belt and hold it ready to attack. I make my way into the lounge and switch the light on. Sitting on the couch holding my family portrait was a man dressed in all black. He had a white mask with a neon green smile.

“Nice little family you got here,” said the man.

“What are you doing in my house?” I say in a cold voice, still holding my dagger.

“No need for that.” He said while gesturing for me to put down my dagger.

“You didn’t answer my question, and I will decide when to put it away” I say confidently while still holding my dagger.

“Alright then, anything to make you happy... Magpie.” He said with a big smile.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Who are you?” I say nervously.

“You know who I am,” he says as he takes his mask off.

“Jack. How the hell are you doing here” I yell.

“I have business here, and when I heard about this new thief. I was intrigued to work with them.” He said.

“How did you know it was me?” I asked

“Magpie’s were yours and your mum’s favourite bird. Both of you used to sit on a tree swing and watch them.” He says

“What do you need from me?” I say.

“I want to work with you” He says with a smile.

“No! I work alone” I say immediately.

“Just think with my connections and your skills, we can steal anything.” He said.

“I said No,” I say.

“Have it your way, but I know I will get through to you” He said as he walked out the door.

I slammed the door in his face. I went to the bedroom and got ready for bed, but I couldn’t sleep. I kept thinking about what he might have to offer, and if I could ever trust him again after what he did to me and my family a couple years ago. I fell asleep shortly after. The next day I paced back and forth thinking about what Jack had said. To clear my mind I waited patiently for the WhatsUp report to appear on my front porch. I take one good look at the front page titled *The Magpie Strikes Again!*

The small print under the title states that *“The Magpie stole a priceless artefact from the National History Museum. On the scene of the crime there were no footprints, only her signature magpie feather, and an engraved fake bracelet. The question everyone is asking is “Who is the magpie thief?”*

I jumped out of my chair in delight, quietly shouting “I am on the front page.” I take the paper into the kitchen and put it in an empty frame. I place the paper in the living room above the fireplace next to a couple of family pictures. I looked at the family pictures and zoned out thinking about the life I had before this. I was brought back to reality by the sound of my notifications. I look at my phone and it’s an unknown number, so I look at it cautiously. The message is a photo of a purple and blue gemstone with a link to the website.

“Hello Magpie. Thought you might be interested in stealing this. Text this number if interested. - J”

I wonder for a minute if it’s worth my time. Then respond “Count me in, under two conditions. One I get half the profit, and Two I work alone - M”

I downloaded the link then blocked the number. I say to myself “Let’s have some fun.”

# Unlucky Number

by Hannah Edwards

The thing in the garden still hadn't moved.

Ever since it had appeared there three days ago, Carrie had been studying its every move, but so far there had been none.

She poked it again. Still nothing. It was just a lump of grass, like her father had said. Sighing, Carrie put her stick back in the wood box and went back inside.

"Is that you, Caroline?" Her father called as the door closed. "Yeah."

"Get us some chips? Ta!"

Carrie took a packet from the cupboard and threw them onto the couch.

Her father thanked her with a loud burp, chuckling at the television as Carrie climbed the stairs to her bedroom.

She sunk onto the bed and stared at the ceiling, counting the cracks. A new one had appeared since Carrie had been outside. That brought the total up to thirteen.

"Unlucky number," Carrie muttered.

There was another loud burp from downstairs. Carrie rolled over to face the wall, winding the duvet around her.

Next thing she knew, the sky was dark, and she could hear her mother's voice floating up the stairs.

"Honestly, Gerald, I don't know how you can live like this! I really should talk to Sherry about getting you a job at the firm... It'd keep you busy more than anything else."

Her father grunted. "Can't. Caroline needs supervision."

"You call sitting on the couch all day supervision? And Carrie's thirteen anyway, she can look after herself."

"Unlucky number," Carrie muttered.

"She's weird, that child. You've seen her. She doesn't have any friends. Spends all her time out in the garden, doing who knows what."

Her mother tutted. "If you'd spend any time with her, you'd see how wonderful she is!" Carrie buried her head under the pillow.

She woke again a while later, her mother's silhouette on the bed beside her.

Carrie didn't want to speak to her right now, so she pretended to be asleep, and shortly she heard her mother's footsteps tiptoeing out the door.

Carrie rolled over and stared at her elbow, counting the freckles she could see. There were thirteen.

“Unlucky number,” Carrie muttered.

She lay there half-asleep until one in the morning when she awoke with a start. Creeping down the stairs, she took some chips from the kitchen and her coat from its hook. Then she crept back up the stairs to her room and opened the window onto the roof, grabbing her duvet as she went.

The sky was clear tonight, and a sea of stars stretched across it. Carrie shivered and wrapped her duvet tightly around her.

“Hey, Carrie,” came her mother’s voice from her bedroom. “Hey,” Carrie said without turning her head.

“The stars are pretty tonight,” she said, climbing out onto the roof. “Yeah,” said Carrie, offering her half of the duvet.

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Her mother accepted, pulling Carrie close to her. “We love you, Carrie, you know that.”

“Yeah,” replied Carrie. “I love you too.”

Her mother smiled. “I remember when you were just a little baby, and now you’re thirteen. Time really flies.”

“Unlucky number,” Carrie muttered.

She could see the lump of grass from where she was sitting, and though it didn’t have a face, or any features whatsoever, it seemed to be smiling up at her.

Carrie took that as a good sign, and she leant her head on her mum’s shoulder, smiling back at the grass. She was almost glad it hadn’t moved.

# Transient Dreams

by Rhea Wilson

As the sun sinks down below the horizon, the whole world seems to be bathed in the faint silver glow of the moon. Looking around, she finds herself completely alone, save for a singular owl that stares into her soul for a second before flying away in a flap of wings. She gazes at the tree trunks in silence as the leaves turn different shades of orange, red and yellow, before fluttering to the ground and dulling to a monotonous brown. Her breath comes out in the form of mist as it wafts from between her dark lips, the air around her not quite cold enough for steam to come billowing from her mouth, not unlike that of a mighty dragon - but not warm enough for there to be no traces of vapour. The vibrant red of her hair slowly loses colour, fading to a muted greyish black, and then to a milky white as frost gathers on the tips. She lies still.

A bitter cold set in, and she rises again. With piercing blue eyes akin to daggers, she surveys the frigid lands. There is no sound apart from the crunching of snow and a quiet tinkling, coming from the tiny white crystals that fall from her hair and land softly on the snow behind her while she walks. Her movements are fluid and graceful, and she goes on in a careful manner, as if all of her steps have been planned out already. But as she walks, the snow begins to melt. Her harsh gaze softens, eyes turning a rather peculiar shade of green, and the frost in her hair thaws. The sun can once again be seen peeking over the horizon, and as the warm rays of light hit her face, no more steam leaves her mouth. Her hair shifts from chalky white to a tawny brown.

Continuing to walk, now with a gay abandon to her steps, she observes as the snow melts around her. Stepping into the forest, she giggles, watching a tiny fawn poke its head out from in between two tree trunks, before its mother comes to usher it away. Tender new growth, tiny emerald leaves, sprouts from the previously bare branches. By now, the snow that covered everything is completely melted, mini flower buds blooming in her wake. Her eyes glimmer and narrow to slits when she squints at the rising sun, not quite high in the sky just yet. She smiles, throwing her arms out and beginning to whirl around.

She spins in circles, arms held out to the open air, long locks flying in the wind. Her eyes gleam as the blazing sun bathes her in warm light, turning both those beautiful tea green orbs and tawny hair a wonderful golden colour. Flowers bloom all around her while she dances under the canopy of leaves, not a care in the world, and all sorts of animals gather to watch as she whirls around. She spins, and spins, and spins, until finally, she tires, finding a seat on a nearby tree stump. She closes her eyes for a split second, and when she opens them again, they are a deep brown. Her hair goes from golden to a fiery red. The animals retreat into their burrows, and she sits there silently, gazing into the empty space.

# Just a Memory

by Olivia Trevean

*A girl... Eyes a luminous blue... Hair a swirl of beige... Creamy smooth skin..*

*A base for features of heavenly descent...*

Why does she feel so familiar? Even those words sound strange in my mind. Thoughts, feelings, memories, my very own identity are ripped out of me, held captive, as if a prize for winning the ongoing wars I am facing. All that remains, the bitter taste of nothing, wrapped in a sweet encasing of discomfort. Everything I've ever known, taken from me. Stolen from me. Whisked off to a far away place, one full of wonder. Mystery. Hope.

## Pain.

Why am I always in pain?

*The sun... Singing happy songs... The clouds... Patiently waiting to weep the stories of pain....*

Pain.

P

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n...

She never feels pain. No pinchy pins and needles poking at her brain. If only she could come to me. Guide me through this state of despair. Pull me into her peaceful dwelling, until, suddenly, the pain, the scary, horrible, torturous, gnawing, knifing, never ending pain could just **go away**.

*Laughter... It dances through the air... Happiness... radiates through her smile...*

She's happy. She's free. It's more than I'll ever be. The scene around her ejects euphoria, elation, exhilaration. Dainty taps of footsteps echo through the nearly silent day. Bees hum busy melodies as they frantically complete their daily tasks. Her laughter, sonorous and musical, reverberates through the tepid summer air. A smooth, soothing breeze, serene and stoic, sways her pristine dress of ivory.

Left.

Right.

Left.

Right

Sweet flowers of all shapes and sizes congregate around her, hanging onto every movement, every sound that she creates. She embraces one singular dandelion in her warm, soft hands. A quick rush of air escapes from her lips as she sets the seeds free, blowing them across the plain. They carry a lonely secret. A wish. One she hopes with all her heart will come true.

The memory, with its ruffled golden edges, has worn with time. Pieces are discoloured and w i l t i n g away. Parts are forgotten, repatched, changed. It's priceless.

But it's just a **memory**.

*"Wait for me.... For I can help you be free...."*

The tsunami of reality crashes down, forcing me to the ground. A sharp blast of water grasps my mind, dragging me out of those old memories. Out of that state. Even... out of my body. An empty shell is all that remains. I am a butterfly, breaking out of that restricting cocoon, finally free from all of the pain. I shelter my own ears, shutting out the ever-growing sounds of the outside world. Streams of tears cloud my vision, and flow down onto the frozen, grimy floor below me. Wild winds whistle warily, watching what a wreck I have become.

The final tear s

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s down my face.

Blurred vision gradually becomes clear, as I re-enter a state of calm. Before me, a rusty old mirror stands, watching my every move. Although dishevelled and disarranged, the golden arches caress the thick, unbreakable glass with such grace. The mirror reveals truths never been told, both humbling and condescending. It purrs everything it sees, not forgetting a single detail.

Even things skulking in the darkest corners become known, all thanks to its potent senses.

The mirror spots something next to me. Not something. Someone. Her body is bathed in the dusky moonlight. Luminous eyes of blue seem sombre and cloudy, dulling the colour ever-so-slightly. The ivory dress is kept to a standstill, no longer dancing along with the wind. She's stuck in a lifeless form, like a statue, glued to the spot. Memories are hidden inside her perfect vessel, kept secret from the terrors of the world around her. They are protected from society's icy grasp. There is nothing that can hurt her now. She can live in that memory forever.

But that's all it is

**A memory.**

\*crack\*

\*crack\*

\*crack\*

Her imperfections are starting to show. The splintering of her perfect porcelain skin reveals the past tragedies. It's like a chasm has opened up, bringing light to those thoughts once left lurking in the darkness. Screams of pain bounce around the slimy walls, like nails scratching down a chalkboard. The mirror reveals a face of torturous existence.

The memories flood into my brain, set free from the captivity. Each one, slightly battered and bruised, brings everything back to me. They susurrate stories that feel all too personal. Because they are. Because they are mine. It all makes sense now.

It isn't *just* a memory. Nothing is. It's an experience. A fragment of time not wasted. Something treasured for all of eternity.

I am, or was, the girl in the meadow. I danced with the wind. I heard the busy, bustling melodies of the bees. I picked that perfectly presented plant and wished with all my heart. I wished for everything to stay as it is. To never change. To always be free.

I am finally free.

# The Government Secret: Lake Woodcamp

By Kyra Baker

\*Phone rings\* I pick up the phone from my left pocket and a display along the top of my screen displays my wife's name, Olivia. I answered the phone casually as she sounded like she had broken her leg. She was pregnant at the time, so I thought she was having a baby but instead said "It's not that-" I interrupted her and told her to slow down because all I could hear was gibberish over the phone. "Check the news Jayden," she says to me.

I switch on the TV as a news reporter, Roslyn Tony, is on ABC News and explains "Breaking news! People all over the world are killing themselves just after a weird gust of wind appears from thin air. They reported some weird creature that when made eye contact caused you to commit suicide. We have no idea how long this has been happening and how such an apocalypse of some sort of supernatural occurrence happened, but it's spreading fast. Some people are developing into zombie-like figures. We recommend that you cover your eyes, find shelter, and avoid any creature that may look deformed or oddly behaved humans that may have been infected or showing symptoms. Blood-covered people may have been bitten so be aware. Whatever you do, don't let ANYONE in, no one, not strangers, friends, or even family. Stay safe Conesway, and let our prayers be with us all."

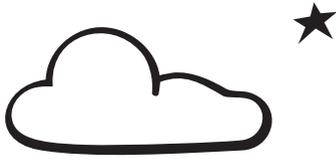
I turn around and my workmates are screaming and panicking. John, my work colleague, whipped off his belt and wrapped it around the light coming from the ceiling then he wrapped it around his neck, then ended it there. On my left-hand side was the newspaper headline set out across the whole page; 'What are the government hiding from us?'. It clicked in my head something was happening to Lake Woodcamp and the government must be hiding a cure or something to do with us humans as their "guinea pigs". My heart started to race at a million miles an hour. I was really frightened. I tumbled down the stairs pushing and bumping into everyone, I fell face flat onto the floor at the bottom. Someone dug the back of their high heel into my jaw leaving a mark.

I started up my BMW running through red lights. All I saw was people jumping out of five-foot buildings and out of nowhere a bus lost control, flipped over, and skidded into the side of my car. I blacked out for a few seconds then my head was spinning around and around. The first thing that came to my mind was my unborn baby girl who was due in a few months. My leg was cramping and blood trickled down my nose. I swung open the door and crawled out, luckily, I was only a few hundred meters away from my house. All I saw was chaos, everywhere. I pulled myself along the pathway to my front porch and BANG BANG BANG on my door. I was so happy to see my family answer the door.

My wife and Noah (my three-year-old son) were all fine and were not injured. I locked up the door and boarded all the windows, the back and front doors.

Nightfall came and silence, no noise, sound, no “zombie-like” creatures, not even birds. We put Noah to bed and discussed our survival strategies. I had some goggles and black paint to paint the goggles. I painted four sets of goggles one for each of us and one for one just in case another broke. I set them on some crumpled-up newspaper in the living room for them to dry.

Three hours had passed and all of a sudden, I felt this airy feeling in my chest. The wind. It was in the lounge. I leaped over to the goggles and chucked them onto my wife. I ran to Timmy’s bedroom tripping all over his toys and told him, “Whatever you do, don’t take them off.” Olivia was shedding tears, clinging out to her legs, rocking back and forth. That’s when I did the worst. I didn’t put mine on. A loud shrieking noise behind my back, zombie or not... “I think I’m dead...” I whisper to myself. A shiver ran down my spine and now something is breathing down my neck...



**Adults**



*Shortlist  
& Winners*

## The Funeral

by Alex Heke

Funerals are supposed to be sad occasions, but as Howard Dent's family sit in the underheated church, eyes facing the expensive gleaming walnut coffin, sadness is not in the forefront of most mourners' minds.

The priest drones on about the enduring legacy souls possess, as Howards eldest son, Jacob, sits in the front pew, one large hand tightly holding his mother's soft, thin one. His mind has wandered from the proceedings before him. Instead, he is mentally rehearsing the speech he needs to give the board of directors tomorrow. Now that his father is gone, he knows it was up to him to keep the ship afloat.

When Howard first started the shipping company, he spent the last of his savings in business cards that proclaimed "Dent Logistics" in large red script. Now, over forty years later, the company had made over fifteen million dollars last quarter and had contracts as far away as Singapore.

Jacob knows that the board had been unhappy the last few years. While they might have been making money, many members thought Howard had not been up to the job. He had been erratic of late; Jacob could admit that. Missing meetings and shouting at staff members. There had been rumblings of a takeover as recently as last week. But the unexpected passing should hopefully put a stop to that. Jacob anxiously tugs at his tie. He will not let the company be taken away from him. He had put up with his fathers' antics for too long to lose it all now.

Next to Jacob, his wife, Belinda, puts a carefully manicured hand onto the shoulder of the young boy to her left. Finn is getting bored and had begun making faces at the priest. He looks quickly at his mother and sticks his tongue back into his mouth. Belinda smiles down at him and returns to deliberating which car she will get now her husband is in charge. The wife of the company president can't be seen in a ten-year-old BMW. It wouldn't be right.

In the second pew Alison is slowly tearing a tissue into small pieces. Anyone looking at her would think she is the picture of grief. The devastated doting eldest daughter. But her mind too, is on the company.

When her husband had run off six years ago with that silly little blonde from the rugby club,

Alison was unsure of what she would do. She had been as stay-at-home mother for eight years at that point, had never put her accounting degree to use. Suddenly she had two small kids to take care of and no money to do it. Her father had come to her rescue in the end, making one of the few charitable acts of his life. By giving her a job keeping the books at Dent Logistics, she had

managed to keep a roof over her and the kids heads. Not that her father ever paid her a cent over minimum wage. Couldn't be seen to play favourites, he had said. No chance of that.

Now he was dead. With his usual impeccable timing, Alison thinks uncharitably. It has only been two weeks since she brought the spreadsheets to his attention. Slowly showing him how somebody had been skimming from the company, recording more outgoings than they really had. He had seemed surprised when she showed him the final figure. Over one-hundred thousand in the past year. Howard had rushed her out of his office, telling her he would handle it, sternly rebuffing her suggestion of police involvement. Then he went and died.

Alison shreds the tissue even smaller. She knows she will have to inform the police. Not to mention the board. It is too large an amount to ignore. But she's also pretty sure the culprit is now lying ten feet away in a wooden box.

On Alison's left, her son, Toby, fights the urge to check his phone. He was sad when he first found out his grandfather had died, he supposes, but to be honest he didn't really know him. As Uncle Jacob rises for his reading, Toby takes the chance to dig his sharp elbow into his sister's ribs. Emma jumps, then swiftly delivers a punch to his thigh, earning them both a hiss from their mother.

Outside a lone figure sits on the side of an overgrown grave, smoking a cigarette. Hannah knows she should go inside. Missing your father's funeral is not the way to endear yourself to your family. Especially when they already think you are flaky and immature.

It wasn't really Hannah's fault. Born over ten years after her siblings, a shocking surprise, one month after her mother's fortieth birthday, she had been wrongfooted since the beginning. By the time she was old enough to be interesting her brother and sister had moved out. Her mother was busy with her functions and parties, not needing a little girl tagging along. The only one who ever made time for her had been her father. He had often taken her with him to the office, sitting her at the small table in the corner, letting her draw while he took important phone calls. He never nagged her, like her mother did, wondering when she would finish university or get a job. Howard had seemed happy just to be near her.

Hannah knows it was different for her siblings. Howard had been hard on Jacob and Alison, taking it personally when Alison decided to stay at home instead of working. Hannah remembered watching her father and Jacob argue, hidden away from them at the top of the stairs, when her big brother had tried to tell her father he wanted to study English literature instead of business. Howard red faced assertion, that he would never pay for some poncy art degree. Jacob had

relented as usual, but she had seen the hurt on his face, years later, when she had announced her plans to study graphic design. Howard had said nothing, happily paying her tuition until she dropped out, two years in.

She sucks deeper on the cigarette as she hears bars of The Lord is My Shepard, leaking out from the small church doors. If she tilts her head slightly, she can see her family through a window. Her mother looks small, standing next to her brother, shoulders slightly hunched. Maybe she's crying, Hannah thinks. Its her mother she is avoiding the most. Had been for few months now. Ever since she saw her father, cloistered in the back of a restaurant, his hands entwined with the young brunettes. He hadn't seen Hannah; she had dropped back behind a pillar as soon as she noticed him. She had tried to tell herself it wasn't what it looked like, but one kiss between the pair had shaken that delusion. Hannah didn't know how to tell her mother, and that was before all this mess. How was she supposed to break a widow's heart. Much safer, she thought, to stay out here. Grounding out her cigarette under her heel, she lights another.

Meredith isn't crying. Her eyes had never been dryer in fact. Sitting after the hymn, she pats her son's shoulder. He has done her proud today, standing up in front of everyone for the reading. Isaiah 57 had been the right choice, she thinks proudly. Meredith is nothing if not an accomplished event planner.

Calling her husband righteous might have been a stretch, however. While Howard certainly thought of himself that way, the shine had rubbed off for Meredith a long time ago. Probably after her cheated on her the first time. Well, the first time she caught him that is. Hannah had just been born, only three weeks before, when she caught her husband with his secretary. She always blamed him for the depression that followed. By the third time, her heart had hardened. Throwing herself into her events and galas, avoiding Howard at all costs. She knew she couldn't change him, no matter how she pleaded or begged. So instead she asked only one thing of her husband, don't embarrass her.

As the priest is wrapping up, Meredith thinks of how he nearly broke that promise. She had told her children that their father had collapsed, a massive heart attack no one saw coming. This was true, but she moved the setting of the incident to the tennis court, describing how he had been in the middle of his lesson when it happened. Much easier to explain than the truth. That the stupid old man had been in the middle of a tryst with a twenty-five-year-old. She struggles not to roll her eyes as she rises.

Standing with two of her three children, they slowly follow the coffin, down the aisle. Meredith gives small nod to the friends and family that have turned out for today. The last day she will give up for Howard Dent, she thinks. As she exits the church, the sun hits her face, large and bright, right overhead. Turning her face upwards, she gives a smile, the first real one she has had in a long time.

## Under the Moon

by Moira Hansen

The moon was beginning its gentle slide across the night sky, spilling a silvery light over the few cars left outside the small supermarket. The air was warm, soft, like holiday air, on the faces of the late-night grocery shoppers, when Carol pulled up in her battered old Toyota and parked under the aging sign whose cheery exhortation to ‘Shop here! You’ll never go elsewhere!’ had seen better days. Up close she could see chipped paint and some of the bulbs inside it had blown, so that several words did not light up as they should. Like a Christmas tree left up too long she thought, hauling on the handbrake, and shutting off the ignition.

She shifted in her seat, getting comfortable ahead of an expected wait, and fixed her eyes on the big glass doors. She was aware of the urge to chew a piece off the end of a fingernail and wrapped her hands around the steering wheel. She had been doing well with stopping that lately and was loathe to have to begin again.

Come on Sheryl, she thought. Where are you? Have I missed you? A small voice whispered from a corner in her mind. How am I going to do this? A whitening of knuckles in their death grip on the wheel. I’ll just come right out and say it, she thought resolutely. Tell her about Carl and the police and poor, dead Nathan. She practised, aloud, in a voice she didn’t believe.

“I know you were there. If you don’t tell the police what you saw, there’s nothing to prove Carl didn’t –“

Her lips trembled. Fat tears glistened, threatening like storm clouds. Come on Carol. None of that. Deep breath. No tears. Chin up. Fiercely she fired orders at herself. She was both Sergeant-Major and raw recruit.

Then the doors opened and - There she is! She opened the car door and stepped out; stood, squaring her shoulders, breathing deep. Right. Now. Just do it.

A small, heavily made-up woman, dark hair all at once piled high and tumbling down, walked to her car, keys at the ready. She wore gold hoop earrings and leopard print leggings with her polyester cashier’s tunic, and in the movement of her gum-chewing jaw, the mean set of her mouth, were glimpses of the girl she had been. It was no stretch to imagine her inflicting a hundred small tortures on another, less confident girl.

“Sheryl”, Carol heard herself say and Sheryl turned. Her red-painted lips smiled but the eyes heavily rimmed in black were cold hard stones.

“Carol? It’s been a while. How’s things?” Her voice was flat, hard, like a slap. Carol fought the urge to smile and be too nice in response. She shrugged.

“We’ve been doing okay. Until now.” She pressed her lips together, forcing herself not to fill the silence, letting it stretch heavy as a blanket, between them. Then, “You’ve probably heard what’s happened with

Carl.”

Sheryl’s eyes flicked, lizard-like, but she made no reply. Carol went on, trying not to let all her words fall out at once in a scrambled heap. “His friend died at the weekend. Fell off the cliff. The police think Carl pushed him.”

Another pause, silence enveloping them like a shroud. Sheryl shrugged, her eyes at odds with the careful casualness of the movement, boring twin holes in the woman before her.

“So? Why are you telling me?” Ferociously chewing.

“Because I know you were there.”

There. It was out. In for a penny in for a pound, heart hammering. “Carl saw you up there in Eddie’s car, Sheryl. I need you to tell the police what you saw. That Nathan tripped. That it was an accident.” Her voice shook and she blinked quickly to stop tears. Her old fear had her by the throat.

Sheryl’s painted mouth took on a humourless smile. She stopped chewing.

“You’re crazy.” She advanced on Carol, jabbing the air in front of her with a forefinger. “Wasn’t me he saw. Your son’s a liar.” She had her old swagger on. “Sounds like he’s gone off the rails since Bob died.” The last a sneer. The Sheryl of old using words to peel skin from soft places.

Carol had a sudden image of herself glued to the ground by the soles of her feet, her body leaning away from Sheryl’s jabbing finger, sharp words like darts aimed at her. She shook her head, feeling them bounce off her, drops of fear spraying from her like water from a wet dog. Realised her eyes were closed. Opened them. Breathed.

A sudden unexpected calm descended like fresh rain on parched earth. Her thoughts lined up and stood in neat rows. She smiled as she walked amongst them, selecting those she would use. You and you and you. Doing some pointing of her own. She took a step towards Sheryl, using her full height to look down on the smaller woman.

“Carl knows Eddie’s car Sheryl” she said. “He’s his football coach, remember? And he knows that cheap coat of yours too.”

Sheryl’s hand fumbled at the car door, but she managed only to drop her keys. In a heartbeat Carol bent and snatched them up.

“Back off, you crazy bitch!” Sheryl blustered but they both knew she had lost her advantage.

“You’re coming with me to the police station and you’re going to tell them what you saw” continued Carol. “That you were having it away with someone else’s husband and you saw two boys larking about. And one fell.”

“Like hell I am” snarled Sheryl, a cornered dog baring its teeth. “I’m not getting mixed up in this. You can piss off.”

“You’re already mixed up in it.” Carol took another step closer. “If you don’t, I’ll be talking to Eddie’s wife about where he goes at night when it’s way too late for football practice. She’s a piece of work, Eddie’s wife. She’ll make mincemeat of a cocky little slapper like you.”

Sheryl opened her mouth to speak, but it looked like her throat was dry. Her words had formed a clump and stuck. She was a blocked pipe.

Carol threw her head back and laughed. Triumph coursed through her veins like heroin. Thrilling, the strength of it. Heady with the energy it gave her, she imagined kicking Sheryl’s car door, smashing the windscreen; felt she could do it with her bare hands.

The flickering light from the battered sign and its dodgy electrics played over Sheryl in the gathering darkness. She seemed smaller, hunched. A Halloween goblin suddenly unsure of herself.

A voice interrupted the circle between the two women. A man’s voice, somewhat breaking the spell.

“Everything alright here ladies? We’ve had a call about a bit of a disturbance.” He stood awaiting a response; was clearly not going away without one.

The eyes of both women slid sideways and they realised a police car had pulled up alongside Carol’s car. The officer now standing beside them was stocky, pot-bellied, not like a TV cop at all. Still, he carried an aura of authority. His eyes moved from one to the other in the silence that had laid itself, soft and dark and heavy, over them.

“Perhaps” he said into the silence, “we could take this down to the station.”

The moon had moved into the other half of the sky by the time Carol arrived home, and there were blushes of pink just forming at the edges of the clouds streaked across it. She parked in the driveway and let her head fall back against the headrest, closed her eyes. The sensations of strength and fearlessness from earlier in the night had completely gone, drained from her like blood

from some grievous injury. How often had she felt, in the days following Bob's death, like an open wound, trying to heal behind a protective scab that life just kept picking at. She thought that perhaps she had made some progress there, having managed to repel any further injury from Sheryl. The thought coaxed a smile. She felt the business had been dealt with had reached an acceptable conclusion. Sheryl had made her statement, exonerating Carl from suspicion. There would be no repercussions. It was done.

The front door opened, and light spilled out of the hallway, making silhouettes of the flower-filled pots on either side of it. Carl appeared, pale as the moon above him. His worried gaze searched for her.

“Mum! Where have you been? Why wouldn't you answer your phone?”  
The sense of many more questions crowding in behind his words.

She looked at the three low steps leading up to the door and paused to summon the strength to climb them. Her shoes seemed made of lead, her veins filled with water, muscles feeble. There was no invigorating sense of triumph to hold her up and drive her on; no powerful steeds snorting and tossing their manes, kicking up dust with the striking of their hooves upon the earth. The horse pulling her cart now was old and tired and no amount of encouragement could move him past his plodding.

She made it to the top step and stopped, resting her hand on her son's shoulder. The dearness of him moved like warmth up her arm and curled into its place in her heart. A cat coming in from the storm to rest by the fire.

Above them the clouds shifted. A line of lemon coloured light pushed through, carrying the promise of warmth and the gift of a new day.

## The Magic Dream Bag

by Arja Hone

Once, there was a little boy who had big dreams. He dreamed such big dreams that they woke him up, sometimes. So big, they woke up his Mummy and Daddy too!

The little boy loved to dream. He dreamed enormous adventures, with huge battles and magnificent rescues. He dreamed of fantastic journeys, taking him to far-away lands. Then, one night, he dreamed of the Something.

The Something was scary. It was sort-of a monster, but sort-of not. He didn't know how, but it was coming after him. He ran in his dream, but it was in all the shadows. He tried to hide, but it was always after him. The little boy got very scared and woke up. Then he woke up his Mummy and Daddy and when he told them about his dream, they said he could sleep with them in the Big Bed.

The next night, the little boy dreamed of the Something again, and the night after that. He asked Mummy and Daddy if he could go to sleep in the Big Bed always. Then Mummy had an idea. That night, Mummy brought out a little backpack in the shape of a Teddy Bear. It had straps on its back and a zip on its belly.

"This is your Magic Dream Bag," she told the little boy. "When you go to sleep, you can bring it with you into your dreams. The Bear will always know how to find you, wherever you are, and you can bring things to help you."

The little boy was doubtful. How would a backpack help him?

Mummy picked up his racing car from the floor and put it in the bag.

"If you get scared, you can get away in your car," she told him. "What else shall we put in the bag?"

The little boy smiled and picked up a book. It was about a train, choo choo-ing over the grassy green hills.

"Yes!" said Mummy. "You can open the book and jump into the land in these pages. Nothing will be able to follow you in there."

That night, the little boy dreamed he was a Construction Worker. He was helping to build a big bridge for a road. He was driving an excavator, digging holes for the pylons, when he saw the sky go dark. He looked around, but the other workers had gone. The Something was coming and he wanted to run away. Suddenly, he remembered his bag. He couldn't see it, but he heard a grumbling sound, and a little Teddy Bear came running into the construction site. It saw him and grinned. It ran up to him and jumped into his arms!

“Grum grum grum!” it said and unzipped the pouch on its belly.

The little boy reached in and grabbed the racing car. When he pulled it out it grew bigger! The little boy could see the shadows getting darker. He jumped into the racing car and drove away as fast as he could, but the shadows followed him. The Teddy Bear was sitting in the seat beside him. It pulled out the book.

“Grum grum!” it said. Then it threw the book out of the car window! The book flew ahead of them and it got bigger and bigger as it went. Suddenly, the little boy was driving onto the green hills of the book cover. The Little Blue Train winked at him as he chugged past.

When the little boy woke up, it was morning.

Mummy and Daddy were very pleased that the little boy had slept all through the night in his own bed. They gave him a special breakfast when he got up and a big Hot Chocolate with marshmallows.

That night, Daddy helped him pack his Dream Bag before bed. He picked up a toy boat. The little boy nodded and picked up his sippy bottle of water, too.

When the little boy went to sleep, he dreamed he was a climber, going up a steep mountain. He had ropes and a little axe to help him climb. He had just climbed up the rocky mountain and planted his flag on the very top, when suddenly the wind blew and he felt very cold. The Something was coming. He could hear it in the wind. When he looked around, he saw dark shadows between the rocks and in the shadows he thought he could see eyes watching him.

“Grum grum grum!” said a gruff little voice. The little boy turned around and saw the Teddy Bear climb over the ledge behind him. The Teddy Bear grinned and unzipped its belly. It pulled out the water bottle and threw it to him.

The little boy opened it and out poured the water. More water than there should be in a little bottle! It flowed over the rocks and swept him and the Teddy Bear away. The Teddy Bear giggled as it bobbed along in the waves. The little boy pulled the toy boat out of the Bear’s belly pouch. He threw it into the water and it grew bigger and bigger. Suddenly, there was a huge Pirate ship in the water and the crew were throwing ropes down into the water for them to climb up.

The Captain was a young lass with curly red hair and a big cutlass sword. She asked the little boy to come with them and have adventures on her ship. The little boy agreed, and they sailed away over the seas. They met mermaids and buried treasure on a desert island and didn’t see the Something again all night.

The next day the little boy's Nanna arrived for a visit, and she brought him a present – it was a bouncy, inflatable horse! The little boy loved it and named it Steven.

That night, the little boy wanted to put Steven into his Dream Bag. He was very disappointed that Steven wouldn't fit in the bag but Nanna had a clever idea.

“Here is a little whistle,” she said. “If you need Steven in your dreams, then you can call him with that.”

The little boy agreed that was a good idea and put the whistle in his bag. He also packed a little, wooden toy sword. When Mummy and Daddy weren't looking, Nanna gave him a wink and slipped a little piece of chocolate into the bag, too.

When the little boy fell asleep, he found himself on a bright green hillside with a castle nearby. It had its drawbridge down over the moat that ran around it and flags flying from the towers.

The little boy looked around and saw the Teddy Bear bag immediately. It was wearing a helmet on its head.

“Grum grum!” it said and threw him the whistle.

The little boy blew a loud blast and heard hoof-beats coming nearer. When Steven arrived, he was huge and white, with a bright pink mane and tail. He neighed when the little boy jumped up onto his back. The Teddy Bear scrambled up after him and opened the zip on his belly again. The little boy reached in and drew out his sword. It was long and shiny and sharp.

The little boy decided he would go looking for the Something himself, this time.

He rode over the hills and through the forests. He found a cave with a dragon, and a tower with a princess, and a wood with some fairies, but he couldn't find the Something. Just when he thought he had looked everywhere, he suddenly felt the air go still. The Something was coming.

He was back on the hill with the castle. The drawbridge was still down, and the gate was open. The little boy jumped down off Steven's back. He walked up to the bridge and looked inside. The Teddy Bear followed him, standing bravely by his side. Inside the castle, the little boy could see dark shadows. It was cold and quiet. The little boy saw a pair of eyes open in the darkness.

The little boy knelt and put his shiny sword on the grass. Then he reached into the Teddy Bear's pocket and pulled out the piece of chocolate that his Nanna had put in there. He walked over the drawbridge to where the shadows started and held out his hand.

He heard a sniffing, then a moving, and a little creature hopped out of the shadows. It had long ears like a bunny, and big eyes like a puppy, and soft green fur like moss, and it didn't really look that frightening at all.

The little boy offered the Something a piece of his chocolate and it looked at him for a long time before taking it, gently, out of his hand and eating it. The little boy gave it a pat on the head and it whistled a little sigh. He had made a new friend.

When the little boy woke up the next morning, he was surprised to find there was still chocolate in his bag, but he ate it anyway (just to make sure it was really there) and it tasted just fine.

He knew that he didn't have anything to be afraid of in his dreams anymore but decided that he would always make sure he had some chocolate in his Dream Bag, just in case.

## Lost Time

by Elaine Casey

'What? You'll be home tonight, did you say? I can't hear you properly, you're breaking up. Where are you now?' Laura twisted a lock of dark hair around her index finger and chewed anxiously on her bottom lip waiting for Joe to reply.

'I'll be home at around 11. We'll be docking into Auckland at about 10 tonight... I can't wait to see you.'

'Joe...'

'We've got a lot of lost time to make up babe.'

'Joe. Joe, are you there?'

The staticky line made it difficult for Laura to hear him, as the ship's engine shuddered and shrieked in the background, making her pull the phone away from her ear.'

'Yeah, I'm here babe. I was just saying that I can't wait to hold you.'

'Joe, I haven't heard from you for nearly a year. You just can't...'

'Yeah, sorry about that babe. There's no reception when we're out in the Gulf, and you know how it is when we're on the rig...'

Laura shook her head. No, she didn't know what it was like on 'the rig' and what would give him the idea she did. She'd sat there night after night waiting for the phone to ring; dying inside not knowing if he was okay. He could have been attacked by pirates-

'We need to talk,' said Laura. 'Perhaps you should go to your mother's tonight, and we'll catch up-'

'I can't do that,' said Joe, his voice changing from his usual light-hearted banter to a more serious tone. 'Why?'

Laura felt hot and flustered; she was avoiding telling him the truth, but fear had got the better of her. She hadn't been prepared for this, and just hearing his voice again made her want to believe him. Be strong. Focus, focus, focus, Laura.

'I've made other plans for tonight, Joe. I can't change them now. I'm... I'm away in Taupo for a few nights... It's a work trip.'

'Is the key still under the gnome? I'll just let myself in and wait for you. When will you be back, then? '

'No... I stopped hiding the key when you left. I was afraid when I was alone.'

Laura closed her eyes. Think Laura, think. She just wanted him to go away and leave her alone.

'I'll just hitch a ride to Taupo then.'

'No, you can't Joe. I'm working, and besides, it wouldn't look good if you turned up in the middle of a women's conference.'

Joe sighed. 'Not the homecoming I expected, Lors?'

'I'm sorry Joe, but if you'd given me some warning it might have been different. I haven't heard from you for... Anyway, what do you expect me to say?'

She could hear Joe sigh. She hoped he'd got the hint. How could he believe that they were still a couple after all this time.

'Aww, come on Lors, I really wanna see ya, babe. Come on, I've been waiting a long time for this.'

Laura clenched her fist tightly and pummelled it against the benchtop, wishing he would stop. Leave me alone. He was taking her for granted and she was tired of being a push-over. She needed to find a way out of this before she got lost in the web of lies that she'd already begun to spin.

'I love you, Lors. I've never stopped thinking about you.'

Laura envisioned his deep blue eyes, his taut tanned body. She shook her head trying to rid herself of the feelings he evoked in her. She'd felt safe and loved then, but that was then.

'Hey, are you there Lors? You've gone quiet on me.'

Laura lifted her shoulders and dropped them again. God, please help me get out of this mess.

'I'll be home in a couple of days Joe, just give me a call then. Come Thursday, perhaps?'

\*

Laura looked around the small flat checking twice, three times that it was clear of anything that might indicate that she was seeing someone else. She grabbed the photo on the bookshelf of herself and Brad embracing at the beach and hid it under the plump orange cushion on the sofa.

She ruffled her fingers through her damp hair and ran her tongue around her lips quenching the dryness as the footsteps came closer to the door.

Oh God, he's here.

She swallowed hard before pulling the door open. She didn't want to smile, and she really didn't want to cry.

'Babe.'

Joe's hands wrapped around the tops of her arms, and he pulled her in close. Laura stiffened, trying to pull away from his hold, but he'd wrapped his arms so tightly around her and she felt herself melting into him. She let out a soft whimper.

'I've missed you so much.' Joe pulled Laura away to look into her eyes. His lips came closer as he pressed them firmly against hers.

'Stop! Please stop.' Laura pushed him away. 'Stop. I can't do this...'

'Lors, what is it?'

'You'd better come away from the door,' she said, as she pointed across the room with her finger willing him to sit.

Joe's eyes darted around the room taking in its familiarity, but there was something missing – his things.

'Has someone died or something?'

'No, no one has died, Joe.'

'Well, what the...'

'We're finished, Joe. We've been finished since the last time you walked out of that door. Finished. Do you understand?'

Joe blew through pursed lips, his cheeks puffing, his chest expanding.

'Is there someone else Lors?' Joe's fist tightened as he slammed it down on the armrest.

Laura felt her solar plexus tighten. How could she tell him that she'd been seeing someone else? Someone who didn't walk out the door and not come back for months and expect everything to be as they'd left it. Just say it. Tell him.

'No, there's no one else.' Laura looked down at her intertwined fingers to avoid his gaze.

'You've left me stunned- I don't understand... We are a couple, Lors. You can't destroy a good relationship for no reason.'

'But there is a reason, Joe. You walked out of that door and never even gave me a thought. What do you expect me to do here alone night after night waiting for you to call?'

‘Hey, I thought you were okay with all of this. It’s my job and that’s what I do. I go away for the long haul. I make good money so that we can build a future together. You know it’s not forever.’

Pulling himself up from the chair, he crouched down beside her and gently stroked her hair with his callused fingers.

‘We can work this out Lors. We can make it work; I know we can.’ He tipped her chin up towards him. ‘I do love you; you know that don’t you?’ He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a small black velvet bag that was tied with a twisted drawstring. ‘Here Lors, I bought you something.’

Laura’s phone buzzed and agitated on the glass-top coffee table. She bent her neck slightly to look past Joe’s shoulder as the phone lit up with Brad’s toothy grin, smiling in full view. Please don’t turn around Joe. Go away, Brad. Not now. Please don’t look. Please.

‘For me?’ Laura took the bag from his hands and kept her eyes focussed on Joe’s eyes to hold his gaze. ‘I’m sorry Joe, but I can’t accept this.’

‘Laura, please- I want you to have it.’ Joe fumbled with the drawstring and took out a diamond cut ring. He hunkered down on one knee and taking Laura’s hand in his, he gently wiggled its gold band over her knuckle. ‘I want you to be my wife, Laura.’

‘You... me... Joe, what are you saying?’

‘I’m saying that I love you, Lors. I want you to be my wife. If it means losing you, then I’ll give up the job.’

She loved him too. She’d fooled herself into believing that he didn’t care for her, but she was just being selfish, and she knew that now.

Joe lifted her chin as his eyes penetrated hers. ‘What do ya say, eh?’

Laura nodded and reached up to touch the prickly stubble on his face. How could she have felt so different earlier? She’d believed he was a rogue that was out to use her and had left her feeling desolate and lonely for all those long months. Now, she was in his arms, wearing his ring as though the past year had held none of the emotions that she’d believed were true. All the fear had left her completely. She felt loved, she felt safe, and she felt wanted. How could things have changed so quickly.

‘I will,’ said Laura as she slid down from the chair and into Joe’s arms.

What was she going to tell Brad? She’d have to spin an even bigger lie now, but she’d deal with that later...

‘Joe... I love you too.’

## The Cat Comes Home

by Ian Jones

The Cat loved her life in tropical Australia, even though she was an indoor cat. Where she did not leave the house except on a leash, while sitting on Mummy's yoga mat lounging in the sun. Sometimes being an indoor cat had its perks as there were nasty creepy crawlies that lurked in the backyard that were waiting to bite, sting and poison her. While asleep on Mummy's yoga mat, she would dream about the first time Mummy came for her when she was just a baby kitten. Mummy cradling and taking her out of The Barn she had known, that was her whole world and home. She knew that Mummy was a kind person that cared deeply about the welfare of all living creatures (especially cats) where The Cat felt warm and safe as she was tucked into Mummy's arms. Smiling to herself as she dozed on the yoga mat: I have chosen well.

The Cat felt something was different with Mummy, as Mummy was worried, and had a strange sense of determination that she had never seen in Mummy before. Mummy has a resolute independent zeal that when she made up her mind, The Cat knew: that once Mummy's mind was made up, there was no going back. The Cat knew something had changed, something drastic had happened that made Mummy's decision final and intractable. Yet she could not put her claw on it, let alone her paw.

And yes: this had her cat brain working in overtime as she knew something had changed.

All cats love boxes and this cat was no different. She loved napping in the warm afternoon sun dozing off while in a box. Sometimes she would dream of being somewhere else or being another animal. Yet when she woke up she was still just a plain barn cat. Even though she was the most special barn cat in the world: really!

There were more boxes lying around than usual. Mummy was busy with all different boxes and was putting things in them. Oh all these lovely boxes to play and sleep in. Mummy shooed her away, waking her up after just getting to sleep. This annoyed The Cat as she showed her extreme "I am not amused" look by giving her a stare with the sternest frown she could muster. The Cat mused grumpily that Mummy should know better: cats do not like being woken up – Ever! And I do mean Ever!

Not long after there were no more boxes around and the house smelt funny, like there would never be a scent of fresh air again. Yet there was one box that was left out: the rectangular box with the holes in that The Cat always knew she was going to see the nice woman that lived in the funny big box with different

animals and all their mummy's and daddy's. Something is up, and yet she still could not put her claw on it!

Reluctantly and very very begrudgingly The Cat went inside, as she could not resist the treats that were at the back of the box with holes in it. Somehow The Cat knew she had been cheated, which was something Mummy had never done before. What was Mummy up to?

It was a warm sunny day where the heat drifted along with a dry breeze that seemed to make The Cat even more hot and bothered. The light reflected from passing the funny even bigger boxes that were zipping past shining in her face. Yet The Cat could hear Mummy soothing her with calm words, where somehow she knew Mummy was talking about me. As I am the centre of the universe (including Mummy's), the Cat thought: concurring with herself as that is how it should always be.

As The Cat was carried out of the shiny box, while inside the box with the holes in it. A range of strange sounds & smells descended on her that she had never smelt & heard before. All the while she was being carried to a bigger box. As they entered the bigger box Mummy started to talk to some other big people. Then she felt different hands take her box with the holes in it.

'MUMMY!!!!!!' The Cat screeched and howled.

In the distance she saw Mummy leave where the other big people tried to talk softly to her: as if that was going to work, The Cat declared to all and sundry! Scared and alone. 'So this is what Mummy was up too! Leaving me all alone.' She thought miserably.

Oww, yeow and meow! That hurt, as she let out a huge meow of pain as a sharp silver thing pierced her skin. The sensation of pain reminding her of when she was stung by a wasp: where she could feel the liquid flowing into her bloodstream.

Soon the Cat felt tired and drowsy: 'Maybe if I go to sleep Mummy will be there when I wake up?' She thought hopefully.

A whining, screeching sound that started as a low rumble & started to build with a momentum that woke her up with a fright. She found herself in a different box. This box was round and elongated, where she was in a mid sized box that had lots of other boxes in it. Suddenly there was a boom that The Cat swore took one of her nine lives and suddenly the room was on a sharp angle. She felt herself lifting, it was a strange sensation that perplexed her. There was also this lingering smell in the air that reminded her of the fast moving boxes. The smell was ubiquitous and omnipresent.

Her cute button of a nose was going into overdrive trying to process the smell. Soon that was all she could smell.

Oh – The Cat longed to be in her comfortable box or even the barn: anywhere but here. And where oh where is Mummy?

Slowly, fleetingly and very reluctantly she fell into a restless sleep. She dreamed that she was flying in the air soaring high as a bird above the clouds. Soaring and floating above the warm breeze, she realised then what it was truly like to be a bird: free. Free as the air we breathe.

She woke with a start, unaware of her surroundings. ‘Hmm still no Mummy,’ she thought to herself gloomily.

The air still stunk tainting her breath where her ears felt funny and started to pop. Ironically the low rumbling soothed her to sleep, she started to twist, turn and flick her tail. She was a bird again flying close to the shoreline. In the distance she could see Mummy walking in the sand. She swooned down to greet Mummy hawking and screeching in greeting. Mummy kept on walking away completely unaware, The Cat screeching louder and louder. As she screamed her loudest screech she suddenly had no wings and started to fall from the sky.

The Cat awoke with a start as the long box hit the ground with a thud accompanied by the high-pitched screech. The Cat could feel the long box slowing down and finally stop. Then she heard voices and rough hands pick up her in the box with the holes in it. She was taken outside where she was hit by a icy blast of cold wind that brought a strong smell of fish. Hmm ‘I like fish!’ She grinned to herself. As she was being carried the smell of fish was stronger, that reminded her of Mummy feeding her fish when she was good. ‘Yet I’m always good? And where is Mummy?’ she pleaded.

As she was taken into a bigger box, the biggest she has ever seen, she could hear voices. She saw the silver thing with the sun glint off it and a drop of liquid coming out of the bottom. Ouch! The sting came and wasn’t remotely any better that she could see it coming.

Everything smelt and sounded different and she started shivering in the colder air. She instinctively knew that Dorothy wasn’t in Kansas anymore. And for the millionth time she wondered where Mummy was. As she waited in her little box with the holes in it, inside the bigger box. She could hear muffled voices, soon one voice stood out amongst all the others. Mummy!

The Cat let out several belated and happy meows as the box with all the holes in it was passed to Mummy.

'Hay there little billy, you're home now.' Mummy said as she tried to soothe her.

The strange smells and sounds receded into a bad memory that was quickly fading. Purring herself to sleep as she was carried to the funny box that would take them to their new home.

After taking a while for Mummy to settle The Cat on her bed, The Cat again purred herself to sleep. Mummy left to make a coffee and put her feet up. When she checked later on to see how The Cat was doing. She saw The Cat sleeping contently at the foot of her bed. As she began to close the door gently, taking a last glance at The Cat. She could have sworn as The Cat twitched and stretched in her sleep that there was a light grin on her face. 'We are home' Mummy thought to herself as she gently closed the door behind her.

## The Crossroads

by Mathew Canlas

The last time we saw each other was on a Wednesday in mid-February, outside the gates to our high school. Tim arrived at half past six on his longboard, just as the sun was starting to set. We were wearing the same black pullover hoodie with the words 2018 LEAVERS printed in white on the front. He was enjoying his newfound school freedom by growing enough facial hair to connect with his sideburns and give him a full, wraparound beard. I went in to give him a hi-five and was glad to hear our hands make an echoing pop.

Ten minutes late as usual, Ariki turned up in his yellow Toyota which Tim and I called the Free Taxi. Tim slugged me on the shoulder with the hardest yellow-car-no-returns punch he could. It bothered me that I'd never be able to get him back for that. Ariki rolled his window down. Instead of the leavers hoodie me and Tim had on, he wore a silver chain and white singlet.

“Cute outfits. You getting in?” he said.

Tim and I both sat in the back — as always, him on the left, me on the right, because Ariki used the passenger seat for multiple backpacks full of god knows what.

Ariki drove up the driveway to our high school. In the three months since we left, the construction we spent most of Year 13 detouring around had finally finished. It was a new sports gym in the spot where our old cafeteria was, a place that had one significant memory for all of us.

It was where the three of us met, after being chewed up and spat out by the toxic jungle culture of an all-boys school. Tim, the arty student who people avoided for being bisexual, Ariki, the standoffish recluse with junkie parents, and me, the bookworm Asian with all As and no social skills. I remember standing at the door, looking for a table that I'd fit into. When everyone wears the same uniform, it's difficult to distinguish personality until you get spat in the face. I was about to sit on the floor coated with vomit and other random brown substances, when Ariki introduced himself and told me about a spot behind the music block he goes to for smokes. He asked me to tag along because he had less chance of being busted if he was sitting with a nerd.

Tim overheard and followed us on his way out. Soon, we sat there every day and became an unlikely group — the gay guy, the delinquent, and the Asian. A minority alliance.

We had to sit there one more time for nostalgia's sake. Ariki parked the Free Taxi outside the music block. The three of us sat against the brick wall, which, over the years, Ariki had decorated with phallic symbols and filthy language.

Ariki spent ages trying to convince me to do one rebellious thing. According to him, I had three choices — take a smoke, carve a dick into the wall, or set fire to a stack of his schoolbooks.

If he had asked me in Year 9, I would have walked away, citing my say no to peer pressure mantra. But now, I saw the merit. I wanted to sucker punch this school that never cared for us. Where the teachers spent their time buttering up the achievements of the 1st XI teams and telling me to touch grass with every A+ I got. Where Tim was allowed to be relentlessly bullied for his identity and where no one had any sympathy for Ariki's disintegrating home life.

I chose to flick the lighter on Ariki's schoolbooks.

As it got dark, he danced around it like a campfire, waving the middle finger and spinning around in a circle. Tim and I joined him.

By the time we left the school, it was nighttime. Tim suggested a Macca's run, and neither of us could say no. Both of them used every chance they got to ridicule me for liking a Filet-O-Fish, even though their orders were just as weird. Tim liked to dip his Big Mac into Coke and Ariki liked to convince workers to put pickles in his McFlurry. I don't think he even liked it, he just liked the attention.

We ate at an empty Bunnings Warehouse carpark, mostly in silence.

"I'm not giving either of you a lift home," Ariki finally said. "Means I have to spend more time with one of you and not the other."

Tomorrow, Ariki was going down to Otago to study economics. I knew he didn't care about the subject, but rather the student culture he'd fit right into. But from what I saw, when he actually did any work, he was really smart. I thought he'd do quite well.

A few days later, Tim was going up to Auckland to study fine arts. University is much more of an accepting and open place than an all-boys school, and I was happy that he would finally find somewhere to fit in.

I had been given a scholarship to study medicine in Melbourne. People always asked me if my parents made me do it. Asian parents and doctors and all that. But the thing is, they didn't. I had the talent and I wanted to help people.

We weren't going to make empty promises to see each other again. I think we all knew the reality. The three of us had a strange dynamic — all of us needed to be present. None of us could pair up and hang out outside of the group. Ariki and Tim were both strong personalities that butted heads too much and needed me to be the safe middle ground. Tim and I got into arguments about the most trivial things. Ariki and I didn't have any common interests.

We were a perfect triangle that couldn't exist with only two sides. As the three of us took our own separate paths home, Ariki put on shades to hide his eyes, while Tim didn't care and gave us both sobbing bear hugs. I ripped off Ariki's shades and joined in. I was excited to move on, but I would miss them.

Those two made the worst years of my life bearable.

## **A Cup of Coffee Later**

by Jamie Webb

Growing up, I had always loved the thought of living in a big city. Streets buzzing with life, hundreds of cafes, new faces every day. Growing up in the country, I had never experienced any of those things. After my mother passed away, I knew I needed a fresh start, I knew I needed to be somewhere new. So I decided to move to the city.

I quickly got an apartment, and a good, stable job. I spent months trying to make the city feel like home, and after a while, it did. This was my home now. I went to the same coffee shop every morning, went to work until the early evening, then returned home to my cat, Neptune. I had a routine, and it never broke. Until it did.

One morning, when I was waiting for my coffee, I got a call from my boss asking me to get to the office as fast as I could. I began to worry, and as soon as my coffee was ready, I grabbed it and headed to the door as fast as I could. I was so caught up that I didn't even notice the man walking in the door. I slammed into him, spilling my coffee all over him. I apologised, and ran out the door, not even fully aware of the burning hot coffee I had just spilled all over that man.

The next day, while I was waiting for my coffee, a man tapped me on the shoulder. Startled, I turned to see a gorgeous man. He had dark, olive skin, bright green eyes hidden behind square frames. He had dark brown wavy hair that framed his sculpted face. He was tall and dressed in a navy suit. He smiled and apologised for giving me a fright. I told him not to sweat it, given I had spilled coffee on him yesterday. He seemed surprised I had remembered when I was in such a rush. I apologised again and offered to buy him a coffee, to which he accepted. We sat at a quiet table in the corner of the cafe and got to know each other. I told him about my life growing up in the country, and he told me all about what it was like growing up in the city. As 9am started to roll around, we said goodbye to one another and left for our jobs. Unfortunately, I forgot to ask him for his number.

A few months have gone by, and, despite my attempts, I've still not seen that man again. I've been going to the coffee shop twice a day and have started buying dinners from the diner next door, in hopes I'll be able to see him again, but my luck would turn out not to be so.

Another month goes by, and by now, I have given up. I've accepted that I'll never see him again and never get to know who he really is.

One day, while I was sitting at my desk at work, I decided that I should get away for a while, really clear my head. I didn't have enough money to go to another country, or even another part of my own country, so I decided to stay a few blocks away at a fancy hotel. After a couple weeks, my boss approved my vacation, and I officially made the booking.

When I arrived at the hotel, I was in awe. There was a restaurant, and a bar on the ground level, and a massive outdoor swimming pool. On the 3rd floor, which was where I was staying, there was a heated indoor pool, and a spa pool which was tucked away around a corner.

I headed to my room to get my stuff put away and make myself a drink before heading down to the pool for an evening swim. By the time I got to the pool, it seemed like everyone had had the same idea. The pool was so full, so I decided to see if the spa was available, but that was crammed too. I eventually decided that it's not worth it and that I'd just go down to the bar and have a few solitary drinks.

I sat myself down at the very end of the bar and ordered a margarita, which had fast become my go to drink. As I was just getting ready to order my third drink, I saw a familiar face walk into the bar. I thought I was just imagining things, but then he came and sat behind me. He ordered 2 margaritas and then turned to me and smiled. I jokingly asked if he was stalking me, as it's rare to bump into someone three times in such a big city. He lightly chuckled and asked what I'm doing here. I explained that I'm taking a break from everything, making sure not to mention the part about me stressing trying to find him.

I turned to face him and mentioned that I don't think we've properly introduced ourselves yet. He smiled and told me his name was Hector. I told him my name, and shook his hand, jokingly saying that it's nice to meet him. We sat at that bar for what seemed like hours. We talked about little mundane things in our lives, like our favourite colours, our favourite animals and so on. Then after a few more drinks we started talking about our childhoods. He told me how his mum died when he was young so he grew up with his dad and his older brother. I told him about my mum's recent passing being the reason I moved here.

It felt like we had a genuine connection, and when the bar hit last call, he asked me back to his room. I politely explained that I was tired, but mentioned swapping numbers and keeping in contact, to which he agreed.

I spent the next few days running around with Hector. We went swimming in the pool, we went to the restaurant for lunch every day, we chilled in the spa pool in the evenings, and by the end of the week, we would watch movies together in his room. On my last day at the hotel, Hector came over to me, smiling. He

said that he has had an amazing time getting to know me and would love it if we could stay in contact. I mentioned that we already agreed to that, which led to him becoming seemingly timid. He then looked down at me, and said that by staying in contact, he meant every day. He explained that he'd grown an immense affection for me and wanted to be with me. I couldn't hide the red spreading over my face. I grabbed his hands in mine and told him that I would love nothing more than to be with him.

A few months have gone by, and I've sold my apartment, and me and Neptune have moved in with Hector. I love being with him, he makes me feel safe and at home, no matter where we are.

I came home from work one evening and saw Hector sitting at the table holding an envelope. A worried look spread across my face. I asked him what that letter was, and he replied, almost in a whisper, that it was addressed to me, from my mother. That was impossible, she died almost a year ago. He handed me the letter, hesitantly, I read it in silence.

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*"Dear Georgia,*

*I'm writing this, knowing I'm close to death. There's a few things that I never got to tell you that you need to know.*

*I know you have struggled with my untimely passing, but I hope you've grown to live with it. I couldn't bear leaving you without telling you why, but for your safety, I couldn't tell you at the time.*

*About a month or two, before I was dying, I went on a trip to Salem. We are from Salem. Our whole family is. I went to Salem searching for your father. I knew he had returned there before you were born, but I never knew why, and I wanted answers, however, when I reached Salem, I was seldom welcomed. I was told that my kind were not welcome in that town, and was told to leave before something bad happened. At first, I thought they were referring to Mages, but they were not. Rather, they were referring to our family, the Arcasias. Confused, I asked what we had done, to which I was met with coldness. I had no idea what happened, but I was suddenly in a cage. Scared, I called for help, and a man in a cloak appeared. I asked him where I was. I was met with no reply. I was there for days before I remembered something. When I fell pregnant with you, I concealed all my magic in a special brooch. I wore this brooch all the time, making sure my magic wasn't gone if I ever needed it, which I did now. I pulled a little bit of magic, just enough to get me away from wherever I was. After I cast the spell, I blacked out and woke up in my own bed.*

*I felt so ill, and immediately that something was wrong. I tried to get up, but was met with a stabbing pain in my abdomen. I lifted my shirt to reveal a jagged cut. I immediately recognised this cut and knew I was to meet my end. I decided I had to get things in order for you, so I put a box together. This box contains secrets that I never dreamt you'd know.*

*The box contains the following...*

- A book
- A feather
- A brooch

*I couldn't store the box at our house, as it would be too dangerous, but I've written instructions on where to find it. These instructions, along with the box's key are stored in our special place.*

*I love you more than you'll ever know, my sweet Georgia and I wish you eternal happiness.*

*Love Mum."*

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I looked up at Hector with a look of shock and confusion. He asked what the letter was. I simply looked at him and replied, "I'm a witch".

He just smiled. He then told me that he had a confession, something that he had hidden from me till he knew for sure he could tell me. Confused, and a little taken back, I asked him what it was. He then explained that he grew up in Salem, and that his family practised magic. He told me he learnt his first spell before he had learnt to walk. He told me everything. He continued by saying that just a week before he met me, all of his magic had drained from him. He said it felt like all of his energy was sucked out of him, and he had no motivation for anything. He finished by saying that the morning he met me, he had felt a surge of energy, he felt like he had to get out, and he was drawn to the coffee shop.

I sat in silence, not knowing what to say. My face was blank, and Hector stared at me, anxious to know what I was thinking. I didn't even know what to think. Was this some crazy dream? Was this an elaborate joke? I had no idea. I decided there was only one thing left to do. One thing that would confirm or deny if this was all real.

I needed to find that box.

## Her First Interview

by Laura Malin-Curry

I hastily snapped my bag shut, the blood drained from my face. Please don't let them see. Glancing up at the three interviewers in front of me, I felt like a deer stuck in headlights. Should I tell them? Surely, they would understand. I took a deep inhale through my nose. My heart felt like it wanted to burst out of my chest and take the next bus home, leaving my empty body here to suffer. I reached out for the cup of water in front of me, the icy cold glass was comfort on my sweaty palm.

"Well, did you bring it?" The question snapped me back to the present. I looked up at the first interviewer, she had short ashy grey hair framing their round face.

"I'm sorry," I replied. My gaze dropped again. I put the glass back on the table in front of me and wiped my sweaty palms on the top of my skirt. "I uh, accidentally left it at home." I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to think. Should I tell them the truth and cement my fate of being the worst interview candidate ever? Or do I keep quiet and hope the situation blows over? The interview is almost over.

Meow.

Well, there goes option 2. My face started to burn hotter than molten tomato in a freshly made toasted sandwich.

"You can email it through after the interview," the second interviewer said, sensing my discomfort. He spoke with a soft voice, like a recently reborn Voldemort from Harry Potter. "So, Kate what motivated you to apply for this position?" I looked up and exhaled the breath I was holding on to. Thank goodness, they must not have heard, I could finish the interview.

"Well, I..."

Meow.

All three interviewers stared at me.

"Was that a meow?" the third interviewer asked in disbelief. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"I heard it too," piped in the first interviewer. Six eyes glared at me expectantly. I felt like Alice in Wonderland, I was getting smaller and the room was growing bigger. I pushed my chair away from the table, my foot accidentally collided with my bag knocking it over. Then everything that could go wrong, did go wrong.

A dark shadow erupted from my backpack, at the same time the door to the room opened. The shadow vanished through the door, leaving a stunned receptionist in its wake.

“What that a cat?” asked the receptionist in disbelief.

“I’m so sorry,” I said getting up from my seat. “My cat must have snuck into my bag while I was getting ready this morning.”

I picked up my bag and bolted out of the room after the shadow.

## Streetlight Starlight

By Leo Hollbrook

I can't see the stars.

That's not a metaphor, I'm almost completely blind and since the stars are more than an arm's length from my face, I can't see them.

I was born this way and I don't know any different and I'm having a great time, thank you very much. No, my senses aren't heightened. Yes I can see you.

I asked my friends what they saw when they looked at stars because I always thought they were boring. Apparently they're not just static dots in the sky. Apparently they twinkle or sparkle or something. I just felt like the sky was a bit boring.

My world looks like an impressionist painting. Broad strokes of colour and shape but no details. I think artists carve shapes out by differentiating their shadows. When I draw, it's the light I'm trying to capture.

When I first moved to Wellington, I was struck by the everyday beauty of fleeting moments that looked and felt like something out of an art-house movie. It was the rain bucketing down in front of the train station, catching on warm car lights and spraying them like sparklers on the brown bricks. Or the enveloping darkness of the Hāitaitai tunnel where I'd daydream we'd pop out in a magical other world.

Provided nobody asked me why I was holding my book so close to my face.

I met this guy online and he seemed sweet. He didn't ask me about my eyes and I didn't tell him and we got along just fine. Knowing I like everyday magic, he took me to the botanical gardens one night to see the glow worms.

It was pitch dark and we couldn't use a light because we needed to see the worms. I think I saw one or two of them, but they were about as interesting as the stars. Pinpricks of daylight in a blackout curtain.

Then I looked up.

The trees formed a thick canopy against the nearby cityscape. Light pollution misted their topmost leaves and the whole thing moved in the ever present wind. It was only second hand electricity and dark trees, but to me, it was a big, open night sky in galaxy colours with sprays of starlight, alive and breathing. My own tiny patches of winking starlight, just above my head, surrounded by water and a boy with his arm around my waist so I didn't trip and fall.

I told him about it as we walked by torchlight back to his house. He was confused but supportive. We got pizza and he showed me a videogame he liked. Then I went home.

We didn't last: He was nice and I was grumpy. I'm still grumpy. But, for a little while, I had the night sky all around me, brought close enough to see.

## Small Town Hero

by Terry Kavanagh

All around me were the screams of men as part of their limbs were removed or other wounds treated with out the usage of anesthetics. Such niceties were not available at the time and surgeons had to resort to extreme measures to save lives. I had been brought in by brave medical staff who risked their own lives to save others.

As I lay with a busted hand and a tourniquet to keep the surge of blood at bay, I recalled how I had gotten into this position. I had an identical twin brother, and we grew up together with an inseparable bond. Everything was done together. Therefore, when the war was declared against Germany in 1939, and, in the true spirit of the Anzacs, we volunteered for active service. Being from a small town on the west coast of the South Island, we were both keen for travel to distant parts.

With mixed emotions, we boarded the train bound for the Christchurch Port of Lyttleton. Mum and Dad were there to see us off and there were plenty of tears as we made our goodbyes. My twin had an extra reason for his sadness as he had to part from his fiancée, Maria.

On our arrival at the end of line, we joined fellow recruits for intense military training before boarding a ship bound for England. Once there, we were transferred to our barracks which would be our home for the immediate future. There we were given an even more exhaustive introduction to army life. We were compelled to perform repetitive, mind-numbing physical and mental challenges, combined with little sleep and monotonous food. Instilled in us was attention to detail, reactions under pressure and a disciplined approach to problems, always under the command of our superior officer. Extra duty was handed out for failures to comply or not perform to set standards. All of this was designed to turn us into disciplined soldiers ready to face anything that lay ahead.

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Prior to our joining the army units fighting on the western front, we took the opportunity to write home. My brother also wrote a personal message to Maria. These we placed in individual envelopes that would be sent on should we not return.

Our trip across the British Channel was unnerving but we all put on “brave faces” as we contemplated what was about to unfold. We did not speak or even look at one another.

We had been briefed about our role as reinforcement to other units engaged in the conflict. Members of those units which had been withdrawn from the battle looked on in grim silence at our arrival. They were in no mood to welcome us. I surmised they were mourning the loss of their mates but only realised later that were also thinking that their time would come to risk their lives again.

In the distance, we could I heard the booming sound and explosion of cannon fire as our gunners bombarded the enemy the Germans and they fired back. After these

bombardments, we heard the sounds of fire as the battle continued on the ground. We had no knowledge of the results of the battle; only that soldiers from each side would have sought shelter in their trenches awaiting the next attack or counterattack.

It was now our turn to relieve those who had gone before.

We pushed forward at pace until reaching the trenches where we were to “dig in”. We saw then the awful reality of war. No one who witnessed the scene (of those who had died and those who were waiting to die.) could ever forget it. It was absolute carnage as bodies (some blown to pieces) and others dead or dying lay where they had fallen. There would be some relief for the wounded when night descended, and medics moved in to recover the wounded and the dead. Tourniquets and strong doses of morphine were administered to the former as all were stretchered back to base.

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At dawn the next day, we were ordered by our commander to engage the enemy for a series of assaults. This was terrifying as we charged across no man’s land with our bayonets drawn. The distance between them and us was only about fifty metres but it felt like double that. We were under constant fire from their machine guns were forced to retreat several times, leaving many of our mates behind. In one of those attacks, I heard a familiar scream, and I knew my brother had been hit.

I reached out to him in futile hope, grasping his hand as his blood oozed out on that God forsaken land. His last dying words were to remember the good times, all my love to mum and dad and to tell Maria I love her. With tears rolling down my cheeks, I raced back to the safety of the trench where I discovered only a handful of my unit had survived. I lay in that trench knowing it was only a matter of time before my life would be ended by a German bullet bayonet or grenade. Yet I bore them no ill will; they were in the same situation as me. Ordered to kill or be killed. My mind was a blur; should I wait for the inevitable end or take a final step to avoid death or capture. A desperate man makes desperate decisions, so, as I waited in that trench, I knew that there was another way of escape. In that moment, I saw that not all was lost. I raised my rifle, and pointing it at my left hand, put a bullet through it.

I have now finished the recollection of what went before.

I recovered consciousness in the casualty unit, rescued as I had hoped by the medics. My left arm was tightly entwined with a tourniquet, and I felt a degree of comfort as the morphine kicked in. Screams and groans rent the air both inside and out as medics chose which soldier was due for treatment. My turn to go under the knife came around eventually. They stuffed a rag between my teeth with instructions to clench down hard. The surgeon quickly removed the hand and moved on to the next patient while a nurse applied another tourniquet around the wound. I was astounded by the bravery of the others around me, most of whom had endured worst injuries than me.

What followed was a drawn out and tedious process; the treatment of the stump, the attachment of an artificial limb and learning how to live with it were the steps designed to maximise its function.

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I returned to my hometown a supposed hero. Speeches were made in my honour and a gold medallion was presented to mark the occasion. I was too embarrassed to tell anyone of how I lost my hand. My parents greeted me with mixed feelings – pride and gratitude for the return of one son but bitter grief that their other son would never come home.

After the fanfare had died down, I resolved to tell Maria of how her fiance had bravely met his death. She had received his personal message and handed it to me to read. I noticed that the last few lines were missing and presumed that they contained intimate messages between the two of them. When I looked up, I could see that she was visibly upset. I then reached out to comfort her and she clung to me with a fervour I had never expected. Our courtship progressed from there and resulted in engagement and marriage. Then and only then did she reveal the contents of the final few lines of my brother's message. It read "If I don't make it home, (and assuming my brother does), please know that it would make me very happy if you were to marry him instead of me" (to which I will be forever grateful). We still smile that, even in death, he had proved to be a most generous match-maker.

We enjoyed a long lasting and very fruitful marriage with plenty of children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

I had divulged to Maria how I had lost my hand but swore her to secrecy.

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I have nearly come to the end of my story.

One day, a wee grandson approached me with a book to read. I perched him on my old knee and proceeded to do so. The title of the book was 'War Heroes'. He looked up to me with much admiration as he was proud that I had come home from the war a true hero. However, he did not know how I had lost my hand, and he raised that inevitable question – How did you lose your hand Grandad? I was about to fob him off with the usual tale of bravado when I came to realise that it was time to "come clean".

As I explained how it happened, he looked up at me with a mixture of astonishment and sadness. Slipping quickly off my knee, he ran to the door. My old eyes misted over at his reaction. The most amazing thing then happened. He turned back, ran into my open arms, and gave me a heart-rending hug. He then uttered some of the most beautiful words that I have ever heard: "I still love you Grandad".

I wept tears of relief and joy as that little boy clung to me. He had exorcised my demons forever.

